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Licensed to pill: Former opioid patient speaks

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By Margo Gray, Anchor [CONNECT](#)

(WAFF) - In our Raycom series: "Licensed to Pill" we showed the impact the opioid crisis is having in every community, including the Tennessee Valley. Much of that focus was on the doctors who overprescribe and the crackdown that produced from the federal government.

Now, WAFF 48 News is examining another side to this story from a former patient of one of those doctors and the fight to break her habit.

A now-empty doctor's office used to be the home of a physician once labeled by the U.S. attorney's office as the biggest pill pusher in the country. Dr. Shelinder Aggarwal is now serving a 15-year sentence for illegally prescribing patients opioids and Medicare fraud. In essence, the government labeled him a drug dealer masquerading as a doctor.

He had patients paying his \$1,200 VIP fee for fast-tracked appointments for prescriptions, and Angela Self paid it.

"I remember going to Aggarwal and I didn't give him any MRIs, no X-rays were done, no drug test, blood test nothing. By the time I left that day, I had five prescriptions, I was even getting morphine," said Self.

Access she bought to feed a full-blown opiate addiction, an addiction she had for 15 years.

Hers started with surgery.

"I remember tripping, falling, going to the ER and them giving me my first pain pill, but then I started finding excuses, not for pain but finding excuses of why I needed this drug and I couldn't do it on my own and it was my crutch," explained Self.

The urge so strong, it cost her everything. She was sent to prison after getting caught forging prescriptions, passing bad checks and shoplifting. However, the true cost came from losing her job as a computer engineer and custody of her children.

"You have kids, you're a mom, you're a beautiful girl, you're smart. Why can't you just stop," said Self.

"It's a chronic disease, so it's not about willpower. It's not about moral failings. So when people say, 'Can you just stop?' Lots of time the answer truthfully is no. There is a lot of stuff that goes on a lot of behavior that goes on when we talk about people getting into recovery and out of addiction," added Nicole Walden with the Alabama Department of Mental Health.

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Every day, 115 Americans die from an opioid overdose, according to the National Institute of Drug Abuse.

But why does it fall on the medical industry or the addicts themselves.

Walden stopped short of placing blame.

"I don't think you can name one thing that says this is how we got here, there is not one agency, not one provider, there is not one issue that says here's how we got here, there is not people you can blame, it's we're here so what can we do to make it better," said Walden.

Walden would like to focus on the how - how do professionals like the ones in this room bring those suffering from an addiction back from the brink.

"There are many pathways to recovery, there is not going to be one right response for somebody when they are trying to stop using and choose a different pathway," added Walden.

The path for Self came down to Suboxone treatment, that weaned her off of opioids over time and intensive therapy.

"Just because you are an addict doesn't mean you don't deserve a good life. It does exist. There is help out there for them, they just have to find the right kind of help," said Self.

If you're looking for help right now, [click here](#) for a list of treatment centers and resources by counties.

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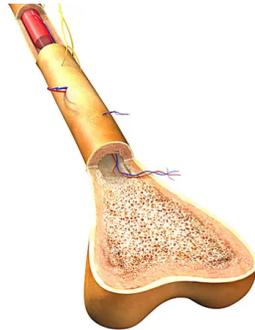
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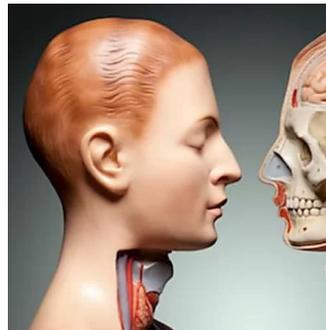
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